

Strengthening the Foundations of Students' Excellence, Integrity, and Social Contribution

FEATURED TOPIC

If colleges could successfully expand beyond the critical-thinking agenda, American higher education would have a much better chance of achieving the goals of personal and social responsibility

IN ITS LIBERAL EDUCATION and America's Promise (LEAP) initiative, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) outlines four clusters of learning outcomes that are essential for all college students in the twenty-first century and that, taken together,

represent a high-quality liberal education.

These include (1) knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world, (2) intellectual and practical skills, (3) personal and social responsibility, and (4) integrative and applied learning. Core Commitments, a related AAC&U initiative, focuses specifically on the third of these clusters. This initiative is designed to strengthen the academy's capacity to foster students' personal and social responsibility. In order to clarify what that means, the Core Commitments initiative has outlined five key goals within the broader category of personal and social responsibility (see sidebar p. 23).

Initial surveys conducted for the Core Commitments initiative have shown strong consensus among faculty, administrators, and students that these five aspects of personal and social responsibility are important goals of a college education. Unfortunately, however, many fewer respondents say that their institution is working toward these goals in an effective way. Why are so few institutions working to achieve these outcomes if so many acknowledge their importance? A likely explanation is

that, despite evidence to the contrary, many educators hope and expect that these outcomes will be achieved as by-products of a college education, that they do not require explicit attention.

The relative lack of institutional investment in students' personal and social responsibility reflects the widespread assumption that academic content knowledge and the intellectual skill of analytic or critical thinking, quite divorced from either action or responsibility, are the overriding aims of higher education and that the development of personal and social responsibility is only distantly connected with those aims. In what follows, we take issue with both of these assumptions, arguing that colleges should aim to teach students how to use knowledge and criticism not only as ends in themselves but also as means toward responsible engagement with the life of their times. We also argue that this can be accomplished best by addressing some core developmental dimensions or processes that underlie and tie together the various elements of personal and social responsibility articulated by the Core Commitments initiative.

Developmental foundations of personal and social responsibility

Each of the five Core Commitments goals involves many factors, and large bodies of research point to the particular configurations that make each of them unique. Despite their distinctiveness, however, the five goals share some underlying dynamics and sources. In order to uncover the developmental logic that we believe underlies these five outcomes, we

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Five Key Dimensions of Personal and Social Responsibility

1. Striving for excellence: developing a strong work ethic and consciously doing one's very best in all aspects of college
2. Cultivating personal and academic integrity: recognizing and acting on a sense of honor, ranging from honesty in relationships to principled engagement with a formal academic honor code
3. Contributing to a larger community: recognizing and acting on one's responsibility to the educational community and to the wider society—local, national, and global
4. Taking seriously the perspectives of others: recognizing and acting on the obligation to inform one's own judgment; engaging diverse and competing perspectives as a resource for learning, citizenship, and work
5. Developing competence in ethical and moral reasoning: developing ethical and moral reasoning in ways that incorporate the previous four dimensions, and using such reasoning in learning and in life

have suggested three developmental dimensions that form a common foundation for the apparently separate elements of personal and social responsibility. We will consider how each of those elements depends upon the processes of identity formation, cultivation of purpose, and learning to put knowledge to responsible use in practical reasoning. First, then, we need to understand in outline each of these developmental dimensions or processes.

By identity formation, we mean the development of the contents and dynamics of an individual's special, identifiable sense of self and, ultimately, his or her subjective sense of individuality, continuity, coherence, and agency. An identity that has these qualities is a powerful motivational force. Research in moral, civic, and political development, for example, shows the critical role that moral and civic identity play in making espoused values real in one's actual behavior (Colby et al. 2003; Youniss and Yates 1997). We know that college is a prime moment in life for students,

including many older students, to question and redefine their core sense of who they are. Educators have the potential to contribute to that process in ways that help students build into that evolving sense of self positive ideals, concern for the common good, and a strong sense of responsibility.

An identity that is well grounded in positive values is closely linked to the second process we want to highlight: the development of a sense of purpose. Recent research shows how powerfully motivating a sense of purpose can be, and how important it can be in supporting young people's desire to learn. In *The Path to Purpose*, William Damon (2008) defines purpose as a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at the same time meaningful to the self and consequential for the world beyond the self. Purpose brings people, including young people, outside themselves and into activities that are intensely engrossing.

The pursuit of ends larger than the self also creates strong resilience and well-being. Damon (2008) reports this finding in his studies of adolescents and young adults, and Colby and Damon (1992) found similar dynamics at work in the morally exceptional adults profiled in their book, *Some Do Care*. It is noteworthy in this regard that in his influential studies of happiness, Martin Seligman (2002) points to absorption in a challenging activity, particularly one that makes a contribution to something beyond the self, as the most reliable source of well-being.

Forming an identity and developing purpose are deeply implicated in the cultivation of a "life of the mind," the formation of a disposition of reflection and criticism. Since identity and purpose are powerful motivators, their proper development contributes significantly to genuine intellectual engagement. But they also help individuals connect intellectual growth with more informed and responsible action, with developing a life of the mind for practice. In *A New Agenda for Higher Education: A Life of the Mind for Practice*, William Sullivan and Matthew Rosin (2008) call the cultivation of this capacity to put knowledge to responsible use "practical reasoning." Unfortunately, higher education pays relatively little attention to fostering this productive interplay of ideas and their use in life. Yet, just that is at the core of liberal

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education's goal of ensuring that students will gain from their college experience the ability to use knowledge and reflection to inform their judgment in complex worlds of practice and to shape their own lives for critical engagement in the world.

All three of these processes—the formation of identity, the cultivation of life purpose, and the practice of relating ideas to life and responsibility—are involved in achieving the five dimensions of personal and social responsibility highlighted by the Core Commitments initiative. The three foundational processes provide an essential developmental nexus for fostering those dimensions. This is evident from a brief examination of each of the Core Commitments goals with our three developmental processes in mind.

Consider the first, and most fundamental, of the five: a consistent pattern of striving for excellence. In order for students to engage responsibly with their work, they need a sense of themselves as conscientious (“I am the kind of person who fulfills his obligations and can be counted on to do a competent job”). If the majority of students could be helped to rise to this degree of conscientious effort, that would be an impressive achievement in itself. But we believe that a more ambitious educational goal is achievable—a drive for real excellence, both during college and beyond. The development of knowledge-in-action and a sense of purpose can both contribute to achieving that goal.

One key to fostering the pursuit of excellence is to help students see and feel a strong connection between their own goals and the subjects they are learning, so that they find themselves saying: “I need to know that! I see how to use it.” In order to feel this way, students need to experience engagement with the world so that they grasp the practical, personal, and moral significance of what they are learning. Hence, the importance of practical reasoning. We see this in the best kind of preparation for a career: teaching practices that place students in their future roles as businesspeople or nurses or teachers or other professionals so that they can experience the many dimensions of knowledge, skill, and responsibility needed to practice these demanding occupations.

When the goals students are pursuing are more fundamental and long-term, extending beyond instrumentality, they represent the kind of life purpose that Damon has described. Purpose in this sense supports exceptionally robust motivation that leads people to

work extremely hard, persisting even in the face of serious obstacles. In studies of the development of expertise through professional education reported in their book, *Surpassing Ourselves*, Carl Bereiter and Marlene Scardamalia (1993) point to a sense of intrinsic fascination and intense engagement or flow as one of the key factors that lead people to keep investing in their own deepening expertise over time, well beyond the end of their formal education. Evidence suggests that the better students understand and the more they embrace the larger significance of what is being learned, the more likely is this attitude of fascination and the greater the likelihood that they will make striving for excellence their basic disposition.

The second outcome articulated by the Core Commitments initiative, the cultivation of personal and academic integrity, is equally connected to the underlying developmental



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processes we have been describing. The key factor for developing and maintaining integrity throughout life is a sense of self or identity in which ethical values are central. To support academic integrity, this must include a strong sense of oneself as honest and trustworthy.

But identity is not the whole story. The perception that knowledge is useful for pursuing one's goals plays a major role as well. If students are really trying to learn, if they believe they need the knowledge and skills being taught, there is less incentive to cheat. However, in order to protect against academic misconduct, the desire to learn has to be grounded in something beyond self-promotion, which points again to the importance of

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intrinsic rather than extrinsic interest—a sense of purpose and meaning in the work itself. For this reason, learning only for the sake of future advancement is not enough for integrity. A focus on competition for the best jobs or graduate schools rather than on a

desire for real excellence in a calling can even increase cheating.

For the third Core Commitments outcome, contributing to a larger community, a sense of purpose comes to center stage from the outset. Making a contribution beyond the self is what a sense of purpose is all about. Importantly, lasting commitment develops most effectively when young people find their own sense of purpose, which means that they have a real passion and desire to make a *particular kind of*



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contribution. So again, opportunities to experience, reflect upon, and practice such engagements are critical to students' achieving this kind of commitment. This is borne out by research—our own and others'.

The fourth Core Commitments outcome, taking seriously the perspectives of others—the capacity to be open-minded and look at issues and situations from others' points of view—is an essential balance to the passion that can be generated by a strong sense of purpose. The research for *Some Do Care* (Colby and Damon 1992) showed an important quality of open-mindedness in people who exemplify extraordinary moral leadership. This critical quality of intellectual and moral humility seems to be missing in fanatics. It is, therefore, especially important that academic efforts to educate for civic or moral purpose teach students to test and balance their passion through genuine openness to others' points of view.

If they are to succeed in life, students also need to learn how to engage skillfully the human complexities of real situations, the varied perspectives, preferences, and claims that different people bring. The need to negotiate these complexities is a big part of why knowledge-in-action, or practical reason, is different in basic form and process from the usual kind of academic understanding. Interpersonal skill is not sufficient for wise and responsible judgment-in-action, however. For that, it is also essential to pay attention to the underlying dynamics of identity formation and the explicit cultivation of purpose. These issues are integrally connected, because engaging diverse perspectives on issues that are important to them leads students to rethink their identities, their moral values, and other unquestioned assumptions toward the achievement of a more mature and thoughtfully examined identity.

Finally, developing competence in ethical and moral reasoning such that it will permeate one's life requires going beyond the purely cognitive aspects of morality to practical wisdom; engaged judgment; ethical habits of mind, heart, and behavioral response; and a sense of identity with integrity and purpose at its core. In order to accomplish this, students need to engage messy, complicated, ambiguous realities and learn to identify and respond to the ethical features of those realities. This points to a different kind of educational experience than academic ethics courses typically

provide—one that is tied to engaged experience and practice, along with reflection on that practice.

Beyond critical thinking

If college educators generally agree that these five Core Commitments goals are important, why, then, are they so rarely a priority in educational practice? There are a number of plausible explanations, but the basic problem seems evident: the academy generally neglects the development of students' sense of personal and social responsibility because many in higher education see those learning outcomes as alien to the cherished value of analytical thinking. The misalignment between institutional priorities and the Core Commitments goals is the unforeseen consequence of believing that the inculcation of analytic thinking is, in itself, the central point and responsibility of higher education.

Analytical thinking involves making sense of particular events in terms of general concepts and then manipulating those concepts according to general rules or principles. Analytical thinking involves framing the particularity of actual experience in terms of categories at a higher level of abstraction. This "rigorous" thinking is central to modern societies. It enables scientific explanation and theory-building as well as their powerful application in technological innovation.

Analytical thinking is necessary for adequate functioning in most domains of modern culture, and most entering students need considerable help to gain the essential intellectual skills it entails. These skills play an important part in making democratic as well as academic or intellectual life possible. Without clarity of thought and argument, without the ability to think critically and reason logically, people are captive to unexamined biases and unable to evaluate the validity of others' claims or their own intuitions.

Our quarrel, then, is not with analytical thinking itself but instead with the tendency in the academy to treat analytical thinking as a *sufficient* scholarly and scientific ideal and educational goal. When this happens, it creates an academic culture that reveres analytical rigor as the *only* important consideration, disconnecting rigorous thinking from sources of human meaning and value. This threatens to create a culture of argument that is so critical,

skeptical, and detached that it can become unmoored from the human purposes that rationality and rigor are meant to serve. Analytical thinking teaches students how to argue all sides of an issue, but pursued by itself, it often leaves them with the sense that the ultimate choice of where to come down is arbitrary. One result is that humanities disciplines, in particular, come to be regarded by students as trading in mere “opinion” as opposed to rigorously demonstrated “facts”—which appear to be the only kind of knowledge worth having.

This is not a new problem. At the source of Western rationality, Plato already was warning about the nihilistic potential of acquiring skills of critical argument that are not well grounded by a moral compass. Plato has Socrates humorously compare such unmoored, fledgling dialecticians to young hounds who discover that they can tear to bits any argument, making the weaker and worse case seem like the stronger and better one. (Many academics, perhaps, can recognize in this description more than a few young and not-so-young hounds they have encountered.)

The development of analytical thinking is an incomplete educational agenda in part because it disconnects rationality from purpose, and academic understanding from practical understanding or judgment. In order to prepare for decision and action in the world, students need to develop not only facility with concepts and critical analysis but also judgment about real situations in all their particularity, ambiguity, uncertainty, and complexity. They need to develop practical reasoning.

The university, however, has been organized around a specialization of research that drives discovery but has also overshadowed the educational mission of the liberal arts. As advancing research has become more prominent as an institutional goal, it has fed back on the educational environment. In largely unintended but nevertheless destructive ways, the research emphasis has reinforced the tendency among many academics to view the promotion of disciplined inquiry as the central or only educational agenda.

The first Core Commitments outcome, the pursuit of excellence, points to a key problem with the “critical-thinking agenda.” That

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agenda represents the nature of disciplined inquiry well but it cannot explain how to get students to care about disciplined inquiry and invest the work that is necessary to master it. In order for that to happen, inquiry needs to serve

some kind of engagement with the world. It is through such engagement that it gains the energy, spirit, and purpose that lead to curiosity and commitment.

An appreciation of the insufficiency of the critical-thinking agenda also clarifies the challenges presented by the other Core Commitments outcomes. It points to the importance of grounding the consideration of multiple perspectives in real situations and purposes in order to offset the risk that engaging multiple perspectives will lead to a morass of relativism, as the young hounds metaphor suggests. Likewise, acknowledging the dominance of the critical-thinking agenda also clarifies the fifth goal, moral reasoning. Teaching for sophisticated moral thinking is more widespread in the academy, and more easily achieved, than fostering a morality that permeates life, precisely because moral reasoning is a variant of analytic thinking. But high-level analytic thinking about morality is insufficient; it must be accompanied by the kind of habitual, embodied, pervasive morality that is the basis for a moral life.

Despite these challenges, we are optimistic about the potential for higher education to cultivate personal and social responsibility. Once recognized, the thinness of the way critical thinking is currently characterized for students can be corrected. A better understanding of the importance of identity formation, the development of purpose, and practical reasoning opens the possibility of institutionalizing a fuller agenda for liberal education, one that enlists analytical reasoning toward the end of a wider cultivation of humanity.

How to support the development of identity, purpose, and practical reasoning

How, then, might we accomplish such a reorientation of academic practice to better support the aims of liberal education? We suggest three steps that educators can take immediately. Realizing their full potential, however, will require effort, organization, patience, and the ability to learn from experiment.

First, pay attention to questions of meaning, purpose, and personal identity in the classroom. A recent study of student attitudes in higher education by Alexander and Helen Astin (2004) shows (1) that the great majority of students want faculty to raise questions of purpose and meaning, (2) that by and large their teachers do not raise these issues, but that (3) when they do, students feel they gain a great deal. In order to achieve the combination of open-mindedness and commitment that is essential to mature adulthood, it is important that faculty model and provide experience with the interplay between analytical detachment and sensitivity to moral purpose and meaning.

Second, incorporate throughout both the curriculum and the cocurriculum high-quality experiential learning, using active, hands-on, collaborative, inquiry-based pedagogies (AAC&U 2007). These pedagogies are commonplace in some kinds of professional education, and also in education for civic and political engagement, though they are less widely used in typical liberal arts courses. Through active, hands-on learning and reflection on their experiences, students are able to bring theory and classroom knowledge together with practice. In the process, academic learning is challenged and refined by the complexities of the practice arena, and the complexities of practice are illuminated by conceptual frames and contextual knowledge drawn from classroom learning.

At least as important is the fact that in many settings of experiential learning, students encounter models of persons they want to be like or fear becoming. This enables students to think in new ways about their own identities and central commitments, making it an extremely powerful kind of learning. This, too, holds still largely untapped potential for teaching in the arts and sciences.

The third important principle in educating for identity, purpose, and practical reasoning is to give explicit attention to the campus culture. We can enhance the culture's support for personal and social responsibility by providing inspiring models, embedding symbols of key values throughout the campus, and paying attention to rituals and other aspects of socialization into the campus community. It is important for the institutional culture to help students think about what they want to be

like as individuals, as professionals in their fields, and as citizens as well as to engage them habitually in socially responsible behaviors through providing opportunities, incentives, and structures for that behavior.

If colleges could successfully expand beyond the critical-thinking agenda, we believe American higher education would have a much better chance of achieving the five goals of personal and social responsibility that AAC&U has articulated as Core Commitments. But that is not all. Research on professional education and education for citizenship provides strong evidence that this kind of preparation would make all aspects of undergraduate learning more robust, memorable, and usable—both in college and in the years beyond. An agenda for undergraduate education that thoroughly integrates education for purpose, identity, and practical reasoning with the already strong education for analytic capacities will better serve our students and also our culture; our civic, professional, and commercial institutions; and our democracy. □

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the authors' names on the subject line.

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